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point of view

A Letter from Ensan Case

May 8, 2015

A Letter from Ensan Case

by Ensan Case

[Ensan Case is the pseudonymous author of *Wingmen*, which was originally published by Avon Books in 1979; it was republished by Cheyenne Publishing in 2012; and by Lethe Press in 2014. It is available from Lethe Press and from Amazon.com. Case maintains a website at www.ensanecase.com.

Below is a letter from Case about Eric Patterson's POV essay on *Wingmen*, which he read prior to publication here. The letter, which is reproduced with permission of the author, provides some biographical information and an account of the genesis of the novel and its publication history.]

"Thank you, Eric Patterson, for your authoritative and scholarly essay on my novel *Wingmen*. This article for [glbtq.com](#) is by far the most comprehensive analysis of the book yet published. The article surprised me, many times over, with insights and observations that had never occurred to me, as well as giving me names for concepts I understood but could not define, such as 'homosocial.' Embedded in this article is also the extraordinary (but obvious) statement: 'Sexual orientation and gender behavior are not necessarily linked.' If my intentions in writing *Wingmen* could be reduced to a single idea, that short sentence would suffice.



Ensan Case in 1972, aged 22, upon his commissioning as a naval officer.

The genesis of *Wingmen* was a paperback book I bought at K-Mart on July 2, 1966. I still have the book and the receipt, which I used as a bookmark. I was sixteen years old, and struggling to understand who and what I was. My classmates and friends, male and female, were eagerly wading into the pool of sexual experience, some making it all the way to the deep end and climbing out as quasi-adults. I had yet to dabble a toe in the water. Not that I didn't want to. What my friends and classmates were doing, and enthusiastically describing, was totally foreign to me. There was just no one available to teach me how to swim.

The book I bought on July 2, 1966, is entitled *The Last Tallyho*. The author, now deceased, was Richard Newhafer. Well before I reached the age of sixteen, I had developed an avid interest in matters military, broadly centered on World War II, and more specifically, on the U. S. Navy in that war. So I was drawn to a book described on the front cover as 'The epic novel of World War II naval fighter pilots.' I read the book, and was impressed with the technical detail and historical accuracy. A subplot involving two homosexual men failed to make a memorable impression on me. I think I believed that I was not like those two characters, and left it at that.

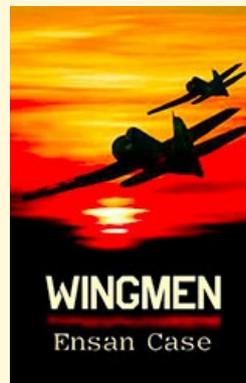


Image courtesy Alex Beecroft.

A decade later, after college and a tour of duty in the Navy, I unpacked my collection of books and rediscovered *The Last Tallyho*. I read it again, and finished with a totally different viewpoint. I had made it to the deep end a number of times by then, with mixed results: some good, some . . . not so good. I knew a lot more about myself than before.

The homosexual subplot of *Tallyho*, so aptly described by Eric Patterson as involving 'dangerous or ridiculous marginal figures,' jumped to the forefront of my perception of the novel. Without going into detail, accept my interpretation of the portrayals of the two gay

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characters as so repellent that today many readers, and not just gay ones, could not help but find the subplot disgustingly offensive. (With true-to-the-era treatment of gay characters, the dominant of the two commits suicide when caught in the act, and the 'whimpering, effeminate' character abandons his shipmates and runs—no doubt like a girl—from danger, only to die an agonizing, but deserved, death. For another good example of this gay character treatment, look up the 1968 movie *The Sergeant*, starring Rod Steiger. There are many, many more—novels and movies—with the same ending.)

At the time I had tentatively tried my hand at writing fiction—a few short stories, an awful novel—but this time, I had a heartfelt inspiration, and the technical knowledge, to write a real novel—basically, *The Last Tallyho*, with different characters and a radically different perspective.

(Actually, the action portion of *Wingmen* ends in February, 1944, during the first raid on the Japanese base at Truk in the Caroline Islands. There, Hellcat pilots swept the skies clean of Japanese fighters, and the bombers sank dozens of enemy ships. To this day, Truk lagoon remains the Holy Grail of shipwreck scuba diving expeditions, whose shallow waters poignantly cover the human cost of war. *Tallyho* ends four months later at the Battle of the Philippine Sea, in which, again, Hellcat pilots triumphed, literally wiping out the last trained carrier air groups of the Japanese Navy.)

In late 1979 Avon Books printed and nationally distributed, (with only typo correction and minor sentence revisions), a total of 60,536 copies of *Wingmen*. By June 30, 1983, 24,694 of these had sold, earning me a grand total of \$3,496.10. The remaining copies were, I believe, recalled and destroyed. So it goes. In 1983, Zebra Books published my next work, *Beach Head*, by C. E. Case. A mainstream novel, it disappeared after one printing as well. Although I wrote another mainstream novel in the 1980s, it was never picked up and I drifted away from fiction writing into working for a living.

In 2011, I retired from the employment of a small (but busy) resort island, where I had worked in another homosocial environment as a police officer for twenty years. I moved away from the island to the backwoods of south Georgia.

When my brother helped me empty my attic—(Lesson: don't store stuff in your attic. Eventually, you'll have to empty it. End of lesson.)—I discovered my file box of research notes and correspondence for *Wingmen* and *Beach Head*, including a Xerox copy of the original manuscript and three pristine copies of the first edition of *Wingmen*.



On a whim, in July 2011, I googled 'Wingmen Ensan Case' and was astounded to discover that it had not disappeared from existence, but had become a sort of cult classic. In an amazing coincidence, author Elliott Mackle had reviewed the book for Amazon.com in June 2011, one month before I emptied the attic. There were dozens of other reviews, and many, many mentions on blogs and forums. Most assumed that I was a veteran of the conflict and, therefore, long dead.

It was an exciting time. After I regained the rights to *Wingmen* from Avon books, Cheyenne Publishing picked it up, and republished it in 2012. Sadly, Cheyenne went out of business in 2014, but Lethe Press quickly republished it. For obscure legal reasons, the cover art was not reversible, so each of the three editions has a different cover. (They're all good.) I'm not getting rich or famous, but the general consensus that *Wingmen* is a worthy novel is very, very satisfying.

[*Wingmen's* status as a cult classic is apparent from the YouTube videos created by fans of the novel. In addition to a score written for a film to be based on the novel, they also include the extraordinary video below from a Russian admirer, which is conceived as a "trailer" for a projected film.]

While Eric Patterson's essay is the most thorough critical analysis of *Wingmen*, the most gratifying reader response came from one of a handful of letters forwarded to me from Avon Books soon after the first edition appeared in 1979. (One of these letters came from Barry Gilligan. After more than thirty years, we managed to meet and exchange feelings and opinions. I still had his letter, and a copy of my response. Barry built and maintains the excellent website FindingBrokeback.com.)

But one letter came from a very special person. I'll call him Jack. Jack was an Army Air Force pilot in 1941, when the Pearl Harbor attack thrust the United States into the global conflict. Flying the twin-engined P-38 Lockheed Lightning, he became one of the Army's first aces, fighting the Germans in North Africa in late 1942 and early 1943. Highly decorated and an early military celebrity, he eventually ended up in England prior to D-Day in June 1944. Shortly after D-Day, he was shot down by ground fire, but managed to make his way, with French underground assistance, back through the Normandy battle lines to safety and his squadron, of which he was now the commanding officer. Now flying the P-51 Mustang, he added three more kills to his total before the war ended. When that time came, he returned to civilian life, where he became a successful businessman.

Jack's letter to me, forwarded from Avon Books, was profound. When he left the military in 1946, he wrote a book about his experiences. Due to a glut of war-time books, his was not published. In 1979, in another extraordinary coincidence, he pulled out his 1946 manuscript and published it himself, in the same year as *Wingmen*.

His book was straight out of 1946, and related his experiences as a womanizing, heavy drinking, hell-for-leather fighter pilot breaking all the rules in search of a good time and a chance to vanquish the hated enemy. It was all true, of course, except for one detail: there were no women in the real story. He had been involved in ardent sexual relationships with two pilots in his squadron. In our correspondence he never revealed what happened to the two pilots, and I never asked. Jack subsequently maneuvered successfully through the minefields of being a prominent citizen of his community and an unmarried man with a close and lifelong male companion.

In his first hand-written letter, which I received in 1980, Jack gave me the greatest accolade an author can receive: he told me that Jack and Fred's story had been his story as well, and he regretted being unable to honestly tell it to the world. After several years of correspondence, we fell out of touch. I discovered recently, from Internet sites devoted to him, that he passed away in 2004. His book and letters are among my most prized possessions.

Being retired and with time on my hands, I am writing again. A novel set in the same time frame as *Wingmen*, but involving Army pilots, is about one-third complete. Trusty Trusteau makes a cameo appearance. My intention in this novel, and subsequent mainstream novels, is to portray gay characters whose orientation is not the central problem to be overcome. Future novels, assuming I live that long, will include gay characters, in minor and major roles, portrayed as simply minor or major characters, whose sexual orientation is only one facet of their characterization. Maybe gay people will come to be seen simply as ordinary people with the same problems, aspirations, and everyday lives as anyone else. And maybe Eric's article will help that process along.

(Eric Patterson has other contributions to this encyclopedia. Read them. You will be rewarded.)"